

EXPLORING KAINGANG ARTEFACTS: A SURVEY OF EUROPEAN MUSEUM COLLECTIONS

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ABSTRACT:

This research addresses the portrayal and preservation challenges Indigenous cultures face, focusing on the Kaingang people's cultural heritage housed in European museums. Combining literature review and museum collection research, information on Kaingang artefacts is centralised, resulting in the development of a crucial dataset for accessibility initiatives promoting engagement with Indigenous cultural heritage. By tracing artefacts' provenance and acquisition histories, this research contributes to safeguarding cultural knowledge and raising awareness of Indigenous perspectives in advocating for rights and recognition. Its significant contribution lies in shifting perceptions toward the Kaingang people, fostering awareness, comprehension, and respect for their heritage. Moreover, such research contributes to ongoing transformations in museum practices, emphasizing ongoing decolonisation and community engagement. It outlines a roadmap for future research, emphasizing sustained collaboration and dialogue with Indigenous communities. Ultimately, this research seeks to contribute to a more inclusive representation of Indigenous cultures in museums, dismantling colonial narratives, and honouring their diversity and resilience. Its specificity on Kaingang heritage enriches broader discussions on Indigenous cultural preservation and recognition.

KEYWORDS:

Indigenous cultures; dataset; accessibility; collaboration; preservation

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revitalisation, and educational awareness, positioning the research as a significant contribution to both academia and Indigenous communities.

Despite these efforts, the research faced limitations, such as partial or outdated digitisation of museum records, language barriers, and inconsistent metadata. Ethical challenges were also considered, particularly the implications of centralising cultural data without direct community control or consent. These constraints shaped the scope of the findings and highlight the need for future collaborative methodologies.

As a result of the survey, a publicly accessible dataset was created, compiling all available information on Kaingang artefacts housed in European museums (see Appendix A). This dataset is the origin of all further observations about the Kaingang objects and includes key details such as the object itself, the museum where it is held, the country and city of its location, its estimated dating, and the inventory number assigned by the museum. Additionally, it records the category and description provided in the museum catalogue, the provenance details when available, and the region of origin of the artefact. Another crucial aspect documented is whether the object is currently exhibited or stored, along with indicating whether there

was correspondence with the museum regarding access to further information. By making this dataset public, I aim to enhance transparency and facilitate greater engagement between museums, researchers, and the Kaingang people, encouraging further collaboration and accessibility to these collections.

ARTIFACTS DISTRIBUTION:

This research identified 214 artefacts belonging to the Kaingang culture from twelve museums across eight different European countries (see Table 1), underscoring their extensive representation across the continent.

Most artefacts from this group are housed in German museums, totalling 108 items. Specifically, 44 artefacts are in the Ethnologisches Museum in Berlin (now called Humboldt Forum), and 64 are housed in the Museum am Rothenbaum in Hamburg. The reason behind this concentration remains unclear due to insufficient information on the provenance of these objects and photographs provided by the museums' collection web pages.

COUNTRY	LOCATION	NUMBER OF OBJECTS
Austria	Weltmuseum Wien (Vienna)	32
England, UK	Horniman Museum and Gardens (London) Pitt Rivers Museum (Oxford)	7 1
France	Musée du quai Branly - Jacques Chirac (Paris)	20
Germany	Ethnologisches Museum (Berlin) Museum am Rothenbaum - Kulturen und Künste der Welt (Hamburg)	44 64
The Netherlands	Nationaal Museum van Wereldculturen (Amsterdam) Nationaal Museum van Wereldculturen (Leiden) Nationaal Museum van Wereldculturen (Rotterdam)	4 2 24
Russia	Kunstkamera (Saint Petersburg)	3
Sweden	Världskulturmuseerna (Stockholm)	11
Switzerland	Musée d'Ethnographie de Genève (Genève)	2
TOTAL		214

Table 1 Number of objects per country, and museums. Table showing how many Kaingang objects are distributed between European countries, cities, and museums. (Table: Isabelle Monteiro dos Santos).

ARTIFACTS CATEGORIES:

While the descriptions of artefacts across museums are informative, they also expose power imbalances embedded in collection practices. These include the prioritisation of European classifications over Indigenous typologies, and the absence of Kaingang interpretations in cataloguing. Additionally, the lack of display data and provenance transparency reflects broader structural silences that perpetuate asymmetries in knowledge production. The Kaingang collections found in European Museums encompass a wide variety of ethnographic objects that provide valuable glimpses into the material culture and traditions of the Kaingang people. Among these artefacts are war instruments (i.e., arrows, bows, and axes), alongside a diverse assortment of decorative and utilitarian objects such as baskets, feathers, and intricate bodily ornaments. Furthermore, the collection includes a broad range of items like drawings, photographs, pottery, clothing, and musical instruments, each carrying both practical functionalities and profound symbolic and cultural meanings within the Kaingang community.

War instruments, meticulously crafted from materials like hard timber and monkey bone, not only serve practical purposes but also symbolize the martial prowess of the Kaingang community (Brandão de Queiroz & Teixeira Lino, 2021, p. 54). In contrast, decorative objects such as baskets and feathers hold dual significance in Kaingang society (Figure 2). Baskets, predominantly made from 'taquara' (*Olyra latifolia*), are utilized in various settings including homes, dances, and rituals, reflecting the Kamé and Kairu Kaingang subcultural divisions (Pohl & Milder, 2008, p. 4). Feathers, necklaces, and paintings carry spiritual meanings and are incorporated into clothing and adornments for rituals and ceremonies, underscoring the cultural symbolism and traditional practices of the Kaingang people (Brandão de Queiroz & Teixeira Lino, 2021, p. 53).



Figure 2 Kaingang basketry, baskets used and produced by the Kaingang. From *Arte Indígena Brasileira: raízes e identidade*, by Associação Indigenista de Maringá (<https://assindi.org.br/arte-indigena-brasileira/>), photograph by Driéli Vieira Manso 2022.

KAINGANG PHOTOGRAPHS:

European museums house a comprehensive array of 57 photographs depicting the Kaingang Indigenous people, distributed across multiple institutions in three different countries. The bulk of this collection, comprising 44 photographs, resides in the Ethnologisches Museum in Berlin, Germany. Two prominent photographers/anthropologists associated with these collections are Wanda Hanke and Claude Lévi-Strauss, whose contributions span various museums.

The collection spans several historical periods, with the earliest photographs dating back to 1876 and the most recent ones capturing moments in the mid-20th century. This detailed timeline encapsulates over a century of Kaingang history, coinciding with the era of anthropological expeditions to Brazil.

The photographs capture a diverse array of subjects, ranging from portraits of Kaingang Indigenous communities and individuals to depictions of artefacts and villages. These visual records offer a glimpse into the rich cultural tapestry of the Kaingang people, preserving their heritage for generations to come.

OBJECTS PROVENANCE:

The Indigenous collections amassed in the early 20th century during Brazil's colonisation were acquired through various means, including war spoils, plunder, land grabs, and the seizure of property (Xavier Cury, 2021). These practices were embedded in the broader colonial logic of dispossession and the objectification of Indigenous cultures. Artefacts were also collected by settlers and travelers in territories that would later become the Brazilian nation-state, and through financially supported scientific expeditions that often operated under imperial and extractive agendas (Xavier Cury, 2021, p. 89). For instance, some Kaingang artefacts were exchanged with European museums, as documented in a letter from 1915 (Museu Paulista, 1914, as cited in Xavier Cury, 2021, p. 97), reflecting not neutral cultural exchanges, but asymmetrical power relations rooted in colonial exploration and scientific curiosity.

Similarly, the presence of Kaingang collections in German museums illustrates the entangled histories of colonisation, migration, and ethnographic collecting. Although these artefacts are often described as resulting from "trade, missionary work, and other interactions," such activities were rarely neutral. Missionary work and ethnological fieldwork, particularly during the 19th and early 20th centuries, were frequently part of a civilising mission that sought to catalogue, Christianise, and discipline Indigenous populations (Seyferth, 2007, p. 01). These collecting practices must be understood as deeply entwined with the colonial structures that legitimised the appropriation of land, culture, and material heritage.

The Austrian-Brazilian expedition (1817–1835), for instance, led by Johann Natterer and supported by imperial interests, systematically collected Indigenous artefacts, including those of the Kaingang, with the goal of enriching European scientific and museological institutions (Albuquerque, 2021, p. 203; Feest, 2014, p. 1). Other collectors, such as Johann Emanuel Pohl, Etta Becker-Donner, and anthropologist Wanda Hanke, similarly contributed to the accumulation of Indigenous material culture under frameworks shaped by Eurocentric and often racialised understandings of non-European societies (Feest, 2012, p. 24; Augustat & Feest, 2014, p. 287; Sombrio, 2016, p. 33).

Despite the rich material record, Kaingang collections in European museums have received limited scholarly attention compared to other Indigenous groups more prominently studied by figures such as Claude Lévi-Strauss (Lévi-Strauss, 1996, p. 144). This disparity further underscores the colonial hierarchies embedded in ethnographic research and museum practices, which have historically privileged certain narratives while marginalising others.

COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT AND COLLABORATIVE PRACTICES:

The Kaingang Indigenous community in Brazil has played a significant role in advancing collaborative museology, particularly through partnerships that emphasis self-representation, Indigenous epistemologies, and dialogical engagement with institutions. These initiatives have been especially prominent in ethnographic museums in São Paulo, such as the Museum of Archaeology and Ethnology at the University of São Paulo (MAE-USP), where researchers like Marília Xavier Cury have been instrumental in integrating Kaingang perspectives into curatorial practices (Xavier Cury, 2016).

At MAE-USP, collaboration with Kaingang representatives has led to the recontextualisation and resignification of ancestral objects. This process has enriched curatorial interpretation, providing insights into the meanings and functions of artefacts previously undocumented by museum staff (Xavier Cury, 2021). A notable example is the exhibition *Fortalecimento e União das Culturas Indígenas: Kaingang, Guarani Nhandewa e Terena*, which was co-curated through interdisciplinary collaboration involving museum professionals and Indigenous representatives. This initiative fostered mutual knowledge exchange and enabled more nuanced, community-driven narratives (Xavier Cury & Ribeiro Bombonato, 2022).

While these collaborations represent promising practices within Brazil, engagement between European museums and the Kaingang community remains limited. Although numerous European institutions house Kaingang artefacts, these collections are often inaccessible to the source community, both physically and in terms of documentation. Moreover, Kaingang perspectives are typically absent

from catalogues and interpretive materials, perpetuating a disconnect between institutions and the communities whose heritage they steward.

Nonetheless, European museums have developed collaborative models with other Indigenous groups from Brazil. For instance, the Dutch Institute for Advanced Study organised workshops in 2013 involving the Ka'apor and Kayapó (Françoze & Broekhoven, 2017), while the Musée du Quai Branly in Paris has hosted exhibitions involving co-curation with Amerindian communities (Reilly, 2022). These cases offer valuable precedents for developing similar initiatives with the Kaingang.

Such collaborations illustrate a broader shift in museological paradigms—from institutions as static custodians to active sites of knowledge exchange and cultural revitalisation. They also highlight the reciprocal benefits of co-curation: museums gain deeper insight into their collections, and Indigenous communities reclaim agency over their cultural heritage.

For European museums seeking to engage with the Kaingang, establishing direct communication with community leaders and knowledge holders is a crucial first step. Involving them as collaborators, co-curators, and advisors in exhibitions, interpretation, and education initiatives not only fosters more inclusive narratives but also strengthens professional capacities for intercultural engagement. Ultimately, these partnerships advance ethical stewardship and contribute to decolonising museum practice by centering Indigenous voices and knowledge systems in the representation of their heritage.

DISCUSSION:

The notable presence of Kaingang artefacts in German museums can be traced back to the period of Brazilian colonisation, during which European (particularly German) settlers, missionaries, and researchers engaged with Indigenous communities and collected cultural objects. As detailed in the “*Objects Provenance*” section, these artefacts reflect the asymmetrical relationships between the Kaingang and European actors, shaped by unequal power dynamics and extractive knowledge practices. In this context, the accumulation of Kaingang material culture in European institutions, especially in Germany, underscores the legacy of colonialism and the global circulation of Indigenous cultural items (Monteiro dos Santos, 2023, p. 8; Brandão de Queiroz & Teixeira Lino, 2021, p. 54). While not inherently positive, the presence of these objects in museums today serves as a critical reminder of historical injustices and the continued responsibility to engage with these collections ethically. Visual representations such as photographs and drawings further illuminate aspects of Kaingang culture, offering insights into their daily practices and material world (Pohl & Milder, 2008, p. 4). These images function not only as ethnographic records but also as important components of Indigenous visual heritage, although often filtered

through colonial or outsider perspectives. However, despite the value of these collections, their accessibility remains limited. Many artefacts are stored out of public view and can only be accessed through online databases, when available. In most cases, museum catalogues do not indicate the display status of objects, complicating both research and public understanding. To address these gaps, various museums were directly contacted. Only three institutions, the Wereldmuseum (Netherlands), Pitt Rivers Museum (UK), and Weltmuseum Wien (Austria), responded. Their contributions were nonetheless significant in clarifying catalogue entries and improving the accuracy of the dataset created in this study.

Accessing these collections online also presented several challenges. Chief among them is the uneven progress of digitisation. Many museums have not fully digitised their collections, and those that have often do not provide high-quality metadata or images. Technical limitations, such as outdated websites, slow loading speeds, and inconsistent search tools, further restricted accessibility. For instance, while the publicly available database of the Weltmuseum Wien listed only two photographs of Kaingang objects, the internal spreadsheet received following correspondence with the museum included 32 items, none of which were illustrated, highlighting the disparity between institutional holdings and public-facing platforms.

Language barriers presented another obstacle. Information was often available only in the national language of the museum (e.g., German, Dutch, or French), with no English translations or multilingual support. This limits access for international researchers and Indigenous communities seeking to engage with these collections.

CONCLUSION:

This research has brought critical attention to the underexplored presence of Kaingang cultural heritage in European museums and the broader challenges of representing and preserving Indigenous cultures in institutional contexts. By compiling fragmented museum records and dispersed literature into a centralised dataset, the project aimed to increase the visibility and accessibility of Kaingang collections for both researchers and Indigenous communities.

However, this act of centralisation is not without ethical tensions. While it enhances accessibility and transparency, it also risks reinforcing extractive knowledge practices by relocating control of information away from Indigenous communities. This tension between data centralisation and Indigenous data sovereignty highlights the urgent need for collaborative approaches to knowledge stewardship - ones that centre Kaingang voices and decision-making. Future initiatives should prioritise Kaingang-led curatorship, digital repatriation strategies, and the development of infrastructure that supports Indigenous governance over cultural data.

Despite the cultural and historical significance of Kaingang artefacts in European institutions, these materials have remained largely overlooked in academic discourse, particularly when compared to collections examined by figures like Claude Lévi-Strauss. This project contributes to redressing that imbalance by identifying both documented and previously unrecorded holdings, laying a foundation for future scholarly engagement and institutional accountability. Nonetheless, this research faced limitations. The data is constrained by uneven documentation, language barriers, and limited access to certain collections, particularly in private or understaffed institutions. Moreover, the absence of direct collaboration with Kaingang communities during this initial survey phase limits the interpretive depth and ethical authority of the findings.

Future research should expand on this foundation through participatory methodologies that actively involve Kaingang knowledge holders in the documentation, interpretation, and stewardship of their heritage. Such work might include oral histories, co-curated exhibitions, and digital platforms designed with community oversight. These efforts will be crucial in moving from identification to empowerment and repair.

Ultimately, fostering sustained, trust-based relationships between museums and Indigenous communities is essential for promoting ethical representation, enhancing interpretation, and ensuring that cultural heritage remains a living, dynamic resource. Honouring the legacy and rights of the Kaingang, and Indigenous communities more broadly, strengthens the link between past and present and contributes to a more equitable and inclusive future for heritage studies.

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A PPENDIX A:
Kaingang full database collection in European museums link: [Kaingang Collection.xlsx](#)

